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The Possible Negative Outcomes of Putting Learners in Spotlight

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Abstract

Despite the vast research on the benefits of learner-fronted language learning and teaching, little is studied and known about the possible negative consequences of pure learner-centered language learning. It will be useful to look at the matter from a different angle, though, the overall image emerging from the literature is positive; independent responsible active learners with great learning motivation. This study reveals some of the facts regarding learner's autonomy. We are going to see whether there are any negative points concerning giving learner's infinite amount of authority. The participants, on which this survey has been carried out, two groups of 20 male upper intermediate learners of English, were selected and treated completely different. One group was given sort of unlimited authority while the other group was somehow reliant on the teacher. After almost three months of instruction, it was revealed that giving learners too much authority would result in serious and severe problems both for learners and specifically for the teachers. Moreover, by the shift of responsibility, anxiety among learners has drastically influenced.

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1. Introduction

What exactly does being an independent learner mean? Although the opportunities and profits that language learners can achieve applying an autonomous approach to their learning are almost unanimously agreed by scholars

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in the field of language learning and teaching (Hurd et al., 2001), it is somehow troublesome to manipulate such a complex approach to language classes. In higher levels of education and learning, autonomy is now seen as a 'marker of gradueness (Railton & Watson, 2005). A graduate in any discipline will be expected to be 'an effective and self-aware independent learner'. Despite this clear complexity, Little (2003) suggests that there is a consensus that autonomous learners 'understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of goals, take the initiatives in planning and executing learning and evaluate its effectiveness'.

However, some researchers believe that the achievement of learner autonomy depends largely on the willingness of teachers to hand over these responsibilities to learners themselves (Candy, 1991; Little, 1995). It also depends on teachers' commitment to create a learning environment where learners can 'learn how to learn' and experience autonomy in order to become more autonomous, a process which Little (2003) calls 'autonomization'. White (2003) points out that autonomy has long been seen as both a central, but also a controversial concept in second language learning.

Besides, Weimer (2002) outlines the key premises of learner-centered teaching as:

- 1) Assume that students are capable learners who will blossom as power shifts to a more egalitarian classroom.
- 2) Use content not as a collection of isolated facts, but as a way for students to critically think about the big questions in the field.
- 3) Change the role of teacher from sole authoritarian to fellow traveller in search of knowledge.
- 4) Return the responsibility for learning to the students, so that they can understand their learning strengths and weaknesses and feel self-directed in their knowledge quest.
- 5) Utilize assessment measures not just to assign grades, but as our most effective tools to promote learning.

Holec defines autonomy in the field of second language learning as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (1980). This is considered to be the most widely used definition in the field of second language learning. The paramount of this definition is the concept of 'knowing how to learn' in which the capacity for critical thinking, and of course, critical reflection plays a key role. As an example, from social constructivist perspectives, learning and the development of internal cognitive processes, including critical reflection and self-direction, derive from the internalization of meaning during social interaction offers repeated exposure to language use by others within a 'zone of proximal development'. This refers to a situation where the learner is not yet able to function independently, but can achieve the desired outcome given relevant 'scaffolding' help (Vygotsky, 1986). Little (2001) depicts learning as the outcome of a complex interaction between social and reflective processes, where both are equally vital for cognitive development and autonomy. From each of these perspectives, the term reflection is used to represent processes of which the individual is consciously aware as opposed to intuitive thought.

While the reported beneficial effects of learners' autonomous learning in the second language classroom are impressive, little has been said about the issues regarding the implementation and practical application of such a beneficial approach. As an example, is it even possible to make use of such idealistic theories in language classes in the context of Iran? Does learners feeling of pure security guarantee their learning? Does learner-oriented approach result in learners less anxiety and more motivation? In other words, although the positive aspects of learners' autonomy are by no means inevitable, the present study suggests that there are, or at least there must be, some problematic issues in this regard. The present study also tries to identify issues which have yet to be resolved or where further research is required.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants and the research site

The study was conducted in one of the English institutes located in Aligoudarz, Lorestan, Iran. The institute

was chosen as the site of study because of two important reasons. Firstly, the institute is reputed to be the most prestigious institute in that area. Secondly, to carry out any research study of any type, the researcher needs helping committed participants. Since this institute was famous for its strict regulations and students were supposed not to be absent for more than three times, and for preventing the problem of participants' mortality, it was chosen as the site of study.

At the time of the study, there were five upper intermediate English classes in the institute, two for female learners of English and three for male learners. In order to prevent the possible effects of gender, we decided to choose two classes from the same gender. Finally, two groups of 20 male upper intermediate learners of English were selected and treated completely different. One group was given sort of unlimited authority using learner-centered teaching, while the other was somehow reliant on the teacher who was supposed to present a teacher-centered instruction. In the former, students were supposed to take charge of their own learning, while in the latter the teacher was accountable for students' learning. Besides, we made sure that all our students have been living in Aligoudarz for more than three years or so and also they should have studied at least two years of English. We tried to make the two groups as homogeneous as possible through selecting a fairly similar pair of partners, then randomly assigning each of whom to one of the tow different groups. The students' age ranged from 18 to 22 with the average of 20.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The study employed four research methods for data collection. At the beginning of the course interviews were used to gather the participants' opinion about both teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches. Altogether, 40 participants were interviewed individually and were asked the same set of pre-established questions in the same order in order to reduce possible interviewer effects. The interviewees were given the choice of responding in either Persian, or English so that they could express themselves freely in whichever language they felt comfortable with. Thirty-one students responded in English (76%), nine preferred to be interviewed in Persian (24%). All the 40 interviewees were males (100%). The interviewees' age ranged from 18 to 22 with the average of 20. Each interview took nearly 20 minutes, totally 800 minutes interview was recorded using a tape recorder.

Observations in the context of classroom were also conducted to find out how the students feel about the two intended approaches. At the initial stage, we tried to use checklists and diaries to extract students' reactions toward the two approaches. At the final stage, the focus was on the films recorded using closed-circuit cameras that had already been installed in the classroom. Altogether, 150 hours of observations were carried out. Thirty hours of audiotapes were used to record the students' spontaneous conversations during group activities in the learner-centered class. Regarding the learner-centered class, we tried to use some techniques belonging to cooperative learning, which makes use of students' group activities and cooperative work. It is also worth noting that all the classes were held in the same classroom at the same time of the day.

Regarding the analysis of data, we tried to make use of cynical data analysis in which the first round of data collection is followed by data analysis. We tried to consider all the aspects of the topic in question through analyzing the data collected in the first round. Then we narrowed the topic down as much as we could and focused more single-mindedly on the possible negative points and shortcomings may have on learners and teachers, using the data collected in the second round. Then the hypothesis was examined and exposed to change until a rich and full picture of data is obtained. Since the topic seemed to be too broad, the decision was made that we should focus solely on the teacher and the learner factors, disregarding the limitations and issues caused by such external indirect factors as educational equipment and facilities, authorities, etc.

3. Results and discussions

As it was mentioned earlier, this research paper focuses on the possible negative aspects of putting learners in spotlight, of course in the context of Iran. Firstly, we wanted to see if using learner-centered teaching is purely promising and effective. Are there any controversial issues in this regard? After that the problematic areas have been identified, our focus of attention was given to the negative effects that applying purely student-fronted teaching may have on both the learner and the teacher. Therefore, our findings can be seen as looking at the issue from two

different angles. First of all, to see whether applying such an approach is applicable in Iranian language classes. Then, does such application have any backfire to both teachers and learner? However, the findings of the study seem to present a complex picture of learner-oriented learning in the ESL classroom.

3.1. *Practicality of putting learners in spotlight*

The interview results show that the students had conflicting feelings about implementing learner-centered teaching to their learning. All 40 participants stated that they do not know anything about student-centered language teaching and that they will be feeling more comfortable learning the same way as they used to, in which the teacher was the mere active agent in the classroom.

It seemed that although at the very beginning sessions of our teaching we talked about the privileges of learner-centered approach over teacher-centered one, students learning English in our experimental group were completely distraught using such a new approach. It was observed that even after twelve sessions of learning through cooperative learning techniques, which is considered to be one of the approaches believing the learner as the paramount in learning process, they were complaining about the teachers doing next to nothing in the classroom. They seemed to be totally reluctant to undertake the responsibility of their own learning. This problem probably traced back to their previous learning experiences in which they had only been passive listener and the only person holding the floor had been the teacher.

It was revealed, finally, that applying learner-centered approach in such an English learning setting, at least at the present time, is virtually impossible, if it is not totally. This is in contradiction with one of the main tenets of learner-centered learning that claims when learners, who are by far the overriding parts of learning process, do not accept a new approach, we should not make them learn under duress; even if we have made sure it is more working and effective to them.

3.2. *Issues concerning learner*

Rod Ellis (2008) claims that the condition under which learners learn has a systematic effect on the language they learn. It has been asserted that the role of learners in learner-centered classes has change from a passive receiver of information to an active learner, provided that teachers are willing to hand over the responsibility of learning to students themselves. "If education and true learning ever had an authentic purpose, the student was always a central figure involved in the classroom, and his or her cooperation was crucial. Without student presence and engagement, there is no learning" (Sion, 1999). "Learner-centered classrooms place students at the center of classroom organization and respect their learning needs, strategies and styles" (Brown, Laboard, 2003). A student-centered classroom "is an environment where previously reluctant learners transit into engaged learners, taking on the role of helping shape their own curriculum" (Henriksen, 2010).

As it becomes revealed from the literature, almost all scholars support the merits of teaching-centered classroom. However, this question had engaged our mind, "Is it possible for anything in the world to be called perfect?" If so, then we suspected that there must be something wrong which makes our findings contradictory. In a closer and deeper examination of the results obtained from our interviews, we found out that psychological awareness, and therefore willingness, of learners in applying any new method is really seminal. Although we tried our hardest to get them to know what exactly student-centered teaching is, their reaction was really weird; they took a defensive guard, did not accept the new approach, and escaped from undertaking the responsibility. Eventually, it was appeared that the only reason they behaved like that was their previous learning experiences with teachers not knowing about the post method era and therefore student-centered learning at all. It was virtually impossible to convince them to take the responsibility of their own learning. The interesting point is that at the end of three months of instruction, only 3 students of our experimental group (almost 7%) were satisfied with the results. The rest of 17 students (around 93%) were seriously insisting on going back to the approach they were accustomed to. Unlike their opinions, we administered the same test to both the experimental group and the control group. When we compared the results, it was revealed that students taking part in teaching-centered program had remarkably developed their knowledge of the two receptive skills, i.e. listening and witting, together with the knowledge of grammar. Unlikely, those taking part in the learner-centered course had mainly developed productive skills, i.e. speaking and writing. They had gained more confidence in expressing themselves more fluently.

Anyway, they have been taught to learn this way and they were afraid of taking risks. It also seemed that if we give them pure security of student-centered learning, the situation may transmit from severe to critical and the result might be the fact that students will not care about their own learning, themselves.

3.3 Issues concerning teacher

Regarding the role of teacher, there have been huge amount of literature; Harmer (1991) identifies such roles for teachers a *controller* for eliciting certain information; as an *assessor* for accuracy when students try to pronounce words; as *corrector* of pronunciation; as *monitor* and *organizer* of feedback; as *resource* when students need help with words and structures. In the modern methodology of teaching, teachers are no longer instructors, nor are they the only decision maker and mere king of the class. Instead, they are supposed to act as supportively as possible and they had better provide students with opportunities for exposure to English input. Since teachers cannot disregard the authorities, this is the art of good language teachers to consider what the authorities want them to do, to combine the authorities' demands with their own plans, mix the two together and finally to create the best teaching and of course learning atmosphere (Hedge, 2000). One the other hand, we are now in the post method era. It means that there is no best language teaching method to be chosen and then to be applied in language classes. Another quality of a professional teacher is to be creative, i.e. to do what is called "need analysis" (Rod Ellis, 2008), to take all the possible aspects into account, to make the right decision, and finally to take the right action.

The most obvious role attributed to the teacher in student-centered approaches is facilitator of learners' learning (Ellis, 2008). The teacher should also meet diverse needs of students and allows students work individually, in pairs or in small groups. This may wrongly imply that in a learner-centered atmosphere, teachers are not as much influential as they used to. In student-centered approaches, teachers, indeed, play a more important part than in a teacher-centered class, but the term "student-centered" may mislead most of the students. Many of our participants went under the impression that in such a learning atmosphere, what the roles of the teacher could be. Eventually, they came to the conclusion that teacher is no longer required to their learning. As an example, in the tenth session when the teacher gave students an assignment, listening to a certain conversation as much as they could and writing it down on a piece of paper, bringing the manuscript along for the next session, one of the students opposed and said "Then what is your duty? It's your task to come to the class and explain everything." It implies that applying purely student-centered teaching without arranging the prerequisites will for sure threaten the position and status of the teacher in the class, causing students cast doubt on the need to a teacher in learner-centered environment. Are we deliberately putting our employment at peril? The answer still needs further investigation.

5. Conclusion

Despite the vast research on the benefits of learner-fronted language learning and teaching, little is studied and known about the possible negative consequences of pure learner-centered language learning. The present study attempts to look at the matter from a different angle, though, the overall image emerging from the literature is positive; independent responsible active learners with great learning motivation. This study reveals some of the facts regarding learner's autonomy. We are going to see whether there are any negative points concerning giving learner's infinite amount of authority.

Theorists like John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Carl Roger's whose collective work focused on how students learn are primarily responsible for the move to student-centered learning. Central to their ideas is that students actively construct their own learning, known as Constructivism. Any well-structured, teacher-guided, student-centered activity that substantially involves students with the course content through talking and listening, writing, reading and reflecting is student-centered learning. Learning is most meaningful when topics are relevant to the students' lives, needs and interests. The students have to be engaged in higher order thinking tasks such as analysis, problem-solving, synthesis, and evaluation. These activities allow students to apply what they have learned early on in the academic process and/or give them a context for new material.

The practical application of student-centered learning in the context of Iran looks more like a utopia about which every scholar in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) is dreaming. This approach seems

to be an idealistic view toward language learning, however, achieving its goals is not totally impossible. The present study shows that the most important issues regarding the implementation of student-centered learning in the context of Iran could be teachers and students themselves. Teachers are not familiar enough with the central idea of student-centered teaching. Most of them have been accustomed to teacher-centered teaching, with which they feel utterly convenient. Learners, too, have no idea about this concept at all, believing in the effectiveness of what have already been used. Then, one may ask "What is the remedy?" The answer is quite straight-forward; we need some teacher training courses to teach our teachers "not how to teach, but how to help students learn. Besides, we need to get the learners grasp what exactly a student-centered class means, that could be learning 'how to learn'.

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